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ARISTOPHANES AS A STUDENT OF SOCIETY.

THE fact that Aristophanes is a most important witness to the social and economic conditions prevailing in Athens in the latter part of the fifth century B. C. is generally recognized, even when his testimony has not been critically studied. The interest of the dramatist in social and economic problems, his tentative studies and theories along these lines, the testimony of his writings to the fact that many of the problems which a little later engaged the attention of Plato were commonly discussed in Athens a generation before Plato began to handle them—these matters have not been so generally either studied or recognized. In the present paper I have endeavored to collect some of the data on these lines and to classify them for further investigation. I shall speak first of Aristophanes's treatment of the motives of social activity and the fundamental postulates of society; secondly, of his analysis of the family and the state; and, thirdly, of his discussion of property and related economic questions.

I. THE ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL LIFE.

The theory of society which may be traced in the work of Aristophanes starts with the fact that economic needs—the need of food, of clothing, and of shelter—are at the basis of society. In perhaps the earliest of Greek dreams of the systematic reorganization of society on a communistic basis, in the *Ecclesiazousæ* of Aristophanes, these needs are to be supplied by the state itself. After land, money, and other property have been turned over to the women in control of the state, then *they* will care for its citizens; “everyone will have everything—bread, fish, cakes, clothing, wine, crowns,” and women (605). Under ordinary circumstances, however, a man must earn the money to supply these needs, and thus they serve as the stimulus which gives rise to all the different arts and trades. “All arts and devices among men were discovered by reason of you [Wealth]; for one of us sits at the shoemaker's bench, another is a

blacksmith, another a carpenter, another gets gold from you and fashions it, another is a thief and a burglar, by Zeus, another cards wool, another tans leather," etc.; and all by reason of wealth.¹ In the defense which poverty offers it is set forth clearly that it is the need of money to meet the fundamental necessities of life which makes men work; "if Wealth were to distribute himself equally, no man would trouble himself about skill in the arts or practical wisdom; and after these were gone, who would want to carry on the different arts, provided he could live in idleness neglecting them?"² So then, the argument runs, poverty is a benefit both to the individual in that it makes him work, and to society in that it causes the production of much to satisfy human needs and in so doing binds society together. Conversely, the satisfaction of all needs by means of wealth breeds gout and inactivity and crime.³ Even the religious side of social life, from the materialistic standpoint set forth by the poet, depends ultimately on physical needs and the desire for money to satisfy these needs. Men no longer sacrifice to the gods when they have money to buy what they want, so that the priest who had shared these sacrifices complains bitterly that the presence of Plutus among men has taken away his livelihood;⁴ men no longer sacrifice to the gods, but to the birds, when it is the birds who look after the crops and cause human activities to prosper.⁵

The general thesis of the *Acharnians* is that war should cease because it interferes with natural pleasures. The war had seriously interfered with agriculture; it had limited the variety of food at Athens, nor could men get enough food of any kind; it had prevented the simple joys of the rural Dionysia; it broke up the new family by carrying off the bridegroom to serve as a soldier. In Megara there was famine such that the citizen brought his daughters to sell them in the market of Dicæopolis; in this case, also, hunger is a fundamental reason for commercial activity.

Again the *Lysistrata* is an absurd and obscene presentation of

¹ *Plut.*, 160 f.; cf. 188 f., 533.

³ *Ibid.*, 560 f.

² *Ibid.*, 510 f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 133, 1114 f.

⁵ *Av.*, 1058 f.

the fact that appetite and passion are fundamental factors in social life; in that it interferes with these, war is to be brought to an end. Finally the same motives which are behind normal social life are noted as causes of crime, so that under the system of communism proposed in the *Ecclesiazousæ* crime will cease;¹ moreover, the same distribution of wealth which would check commercial activity would also check crime.²

Imitation as a factor in social life is recognized by the poet. In Athens, and in the parody of Athens in the *Birds*, men are subject to crazes of imitation:

In the time before
There was a Spartan mania, and people went
Stalking about the streets, with Spartan staves,
With their long hair, unwashed and slovenly,
Like so many Socrates's; but, of late,
Birds are the fashion — Birds are all in all —
Their modes of life are grown to be mere copies
Of the birds' habits; rising with the lark,
Scratching and scrabbling suits and informations;
Picking and pecking upon points of law;
Brooding and hatching evidence.³

An example of this trait in the Athenian appears in the *Ecclesiazousæ* (787). Before yielding to the demands of the new communism, the citizen waits to see whether others propose to obey the law before he obeys it and turns in his property.

Aristophanes clearly recognizes that habit and tradition are conservative forces which lend stability to society. The birds lack stability of manner and persistence of purpose,⁴ a feature of the bird-city in which the Athenians could not but see reflected a lack of their own.⁵ One advantage in the new rule of the women proposed in the *Ecclesiazousæ* is to be that love of the good old ways which marks women (215), while men are always ready to try some new thing (584 f.). Strepsiades in the opening of the *Clouds* laments that slaves are no longer under the control of masters, because the old social conditions are dis-

¹ *Ecl.*, 698 f., 670.

² *Plut.*, 165 and 565 f.

³ *Av.*, 1280; FRERE'S translation.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁵ *Cf. Ecl.*, 813 f.

turbed by war. In the discussion between the two *logoi* the value of conservative custom in giving permanence to society is clearly set forth; in fact, this might be treated as the main thesis of the *Clouds*.

That the love of excitement was a potent factor in Athenian life is quite generally recognized. The popularity of the law courts, which was due in a measure to this love of excitement, is a theme of which Aristophanes never tires.¹ It is treated at greatest length in the *Wasps*, in which Philocleon is represented as fairly crazy on the subject; at the end of the play, however, it appears that the craze can be overcome. After the "homœopathic" treatment of a mimic court, an appeal to appetite and to the Athenian fondness for display quite wins over the old man.

The ethical postulates at the basis of society are not passed over without recognition. In the *Clouds* Strepsiades is most anxious to discover a means of repudiating his debts.² In spite of warnings, he places first himself, then his son, under the tutelage of Socrates in order to learn how to make "the worse appear the better reason;" he succeeds in shaking off two of his creditors, but he is soon taught that the weapon he is using may be turned against himself. In the end the man most inclined to protest against the demands of social justice learns his own dependence on it. The result of the dramatic action is emphasized in the discussion; in particular, the argument of the two *logoi* bring out the poet's conception of the value of education and religion as ethical forces which underlie anything that deserves the name of society. In the *Birds* the effort of two Athenians to escape social and political obligations meets with the most fantastic success. It was not the aim of the *Clouds* to preach the value of justice, but rather to hit off the characteristic traits of the sophist in such a way as to amuse the audience; so it was not the aim of the *Birds* to demonstrate that a man can escape from the demands of society or that he cannot escape them; the aim was to amuse the audience by an extravagant picture of the results which took place when a man attempted

¹ Cf. *Ecc.*, 450, 560, 585.

² *Nub.*, 444 f., 1142 f.

to escape these demands. The extravagance of the poet is indication enough that he knew the futility of such efforts as were made by Euelpides and Peithetærus.

II. THE FAMILY AND THE STATE.

The family is treated by Aristophanes from three points of view. First, as to the relation of husband and wife, the poet sees their mutual dependence and makes this fact the central feature of the *Lysistrata*. In the parabasis of the *Thesmophoriazousæ* (786 f.) the attitude of husbands toward their wives, the way they speak ill of their wives while at the same time they guard these "plagues" as most precious, is cleverly described:

They're always abusing the women,
As a terrible plague to men:
They say we're the root of all evil,
And repeat it again and again. . . .
And pray, then, why do you marry us,
If we're all the plagues you say?
And why do you take such care of us,
And keep us so safe at home,
And are never easy a moment,
If ever we chance to roam?
When you ought to be thanking heaven
That your plague is out of the way.¹

Finally in the *Clouds* the fact that Strepsiades has taken a wife from a higher social station than his own is one of the factors that complicate the plot. Their tastes differ at every point; she involves her husband in the debts from which he is trying to escape, and she wants to bring up their son as a member of the class in society from which she came.

Secondly, Aristophanes points out that the home is the woman's sphere, and that she wins credit by proper management of it. His women complain that the dramas of Euripides had made the Athenians very suspicious of their wives.² If one were to take the representation of the women by comedy as the criterion, he would regard the opinion attributed to Euripides as only too well founded; Aristophanes, however, is consciously

¹ Collin's translation.

² *Thesm.*, 385, 419; *Batr.*, 980.

assuming the privileges of a satirist ; he feels not the slightest hesitation in making use of Euripides's devices, even when he is holding up Euripides himself to ridicule. There must be irony in the proposal to turn over the management of the state to women because they managed their households so well;¹ perhaps the poet thought that households were no better managed than the scheme of government which the women tried to institute. That women were easily led by passion (as in their attempt to get even with Euripides), that they were inclined to be visionary, that they found amusement in cheating their husbands in small matters,² no doubt the poet would hold ; it is very evident also that he can count on amusing his audience by treating the failings of women ; still, if I read these comedies rightly, the ability of women in general to manage a home well was not discredited either by the poet or by his audience.

Thirdly, the relation of father and son is frequently treated in these plays. In the *Clouds* Pheidippides is brought up from childhood to feel that he is superior to his father. He treats his father's suggestions somewhat cavalierly ; having the support of his mother and her aristocratic connections, he is not much moved by his father's threat to turn him out of the house ; but by bribes, persuasions, and threats Strepsiades finally gains his point. It is only as the result of the new sophistic teaching that the respect of the son entirely disappears, so that he justifies himself in beating his father. In the *Ecclesiazousæ* (635 f.) one of the great objections to the communistic family is that fathers will not know their sons ; to this Aristophanes replies, as Plato replied later, that all the young will reverence the older as fathers so much the more because the older will combine to enforce their rights. In the *Birds* (1351) the man who wants to treat his father as birds are said to treat their parents is advised to go and fight the Thracians instead. The plot of the *Wasps* turns on the difficulties which no doubt often did arise when the father was old and unreasonable ; here and in the *Clouds* we have the Greek justification for this treatment of sons by parents, in that each man has his turn as father.

¹ *Ecl.*, 211.

² *Thesm.*, 812.

Much as Aristophanes has to say about contemporary politics, with its wholesale briberies,¹ its wheedling of the sovereign people,² and the misconduct of those intrusted with power,³ he says but little about the functions of the state, or the principle on which the state is based. So strong are democratic tendencies at Athens that, if one asks a fish-dealer for some kind of fish which he does not happen to have on hand, he may be answered that it savors of tyranny to be so particular about one's food.⁴ One of the most convincing arguments against the administration at Athens which had been carrying on the Peloponnesian war was the charge of unfairness in the distribution of duties and privileges by the state.⁵ This jealous watch over the rights of each member of the community shows what democracy meant for the Athenians of Aristophanes's day, viz., that the rights of the individual were quite as important as the authority of the community. Closely connected with this sentiment is the fundamental principle of Athenian politics, the principle that the origin and legitimacy of government depend on the will of the people. So fully was this principle recognized that we need hardly be surprised to find that Aristophanes and his audience do not seem to have given critical consideration to the question of the state. This principle finds a good illustration in the ease with which the new communistic constitution of the *Ecclesiazousæ* was proposed and set in operation. Such a change seemed quite natural for the Athenians of that day, because it was in line both with political practice⁶ and with the political philosophy of the day. It was only necessary for the women to give themselves a little practice in debate, and to steal away from their husbands dressed up as men—scenes which furnish free scope for the poet's fun; then they can pack the assembly and put through the constitution which turns over the government of the state to the women.

In the arguments adduced in favor of the new plan, both before the assembly and later in private discussion, there is

¹ *Pax*, 645; *Plut.*, 170 f.

² *Achar.*, 639 f.; *Equit.*, *pass.*

³ *Cf.* the report of the embassies, *Achar.*, 65 f.

⁴ *Vesp.*, 493 f.; *Cf.* *Pax*, 640.

⁵ *Achar.*, 609 f.

⁶ *Cf.* *Ibid.*, 632.

some attempt to analyze the different functions of the state.¹ The army will be in the hands of wives and mothers who will see that life is not thrown away recklessly and that the hardships of the soldiers are not too great. The women claim some skill in financial administration; as they have managed the household in spite of interference by their husbands,² so they will take into their hands the property of all the citizens and use the revenues to supply the needs of all. The administration of justice will be directly in the hands of the executive power, so as to dispense with litigation. Further, it will be unnecessary to punish crime, for the causes of crime are to be removed, while the control of the necessities of life will make the authority of the new government absolute.

From this account it appears that the essential difference between the family and the state is overlooked, not perhaps by Aristophanes so much as by the philosophers whose conceptions he holds up to ridicule. Financial, judicial, and military activity are recognized as functions of the state, while all three are subordinated to the direct effort to meet the individual economic needs of the citizens. Communism is held up to ridicule and is brought to a speedy end; the recognition of the economic basis of the state, and some crude analysis of the functions of the state represent the condition of political science as understood by the poet.

III. PROPERTY AND ECONOMIC QUESTIONS.

The scheme of communism, the inauguration and failure of which constitute the plot of the *Ecclesiiazousæ*, is interesting from the economic as well as from the political side. Such schemes inevitably come up for discussion when the distribution of wealth in a state theoretically democratic becomes very unequal. Moreover, certain practices at Athens would serve as a natural starting-point for the theory. The gifts of corn to the people,³ and the practice of bribing the people into good humor ridiculed in the *Knights* (where the assembly turns first

¹ Cf. especially *Ecccl.*, 232 f., 452 f., 560 f.

² *Ecccl.*, 211; *Thesm.*, 419, 812; *Batr.*, 982; *Lysist.*, 495.

³ *Vesp.*, 715 f.

to the man who announces cheap sardines, then to the man who proposes a large public sacrifice in honor of so toward an event),¹ might easily give rise to the belief that the state could supply all the wants of the poor, if only it chose to do it. It should be noted, further, that nothing is said of communism in the opening of the play. Misrule and inequality of property are the evils which the women set out to correct. At first the suggestion is made that the state might fittingly provide for the wants of the poor.² Only when the rule of the women is actually under way is the more radical proposition broached. Starting with the theory of equal rights, the women now propose that all property be vested in the state as such, and that the state supply all the wants of all its citizens. In the scene justifying this proposal³ it is explained that all work will be done by slaves, that the houses will all be thrown into one, that meals will be served in public, and that marriage, or any permanence in the relations of men and women, will be abolished. The promoters of this scheme recognize that it will do away with the value of money and with all commerce as well as with much crime, and further, that it will remove both the necessity of labor and the incentive to labor. The practice of assigning offices by lot, as though they were gifts which the state might bestow on a few citizens, no doubt made it seem more feasible to propose that the state give meals to all its citizens and assign them places at the table by lot. The presentation of this plan, and that through women disguised as men, formed a fitting subject for comedy; to criticise was no part of the poet's purpose. He does, however, suggest the result—the shipwreck of the whole plan in the failure to adjust satisfactorily the relations between men and women.

The sources of wealth are enumerated in the *Birds* (588 f.) as agriculture, mines, commerce, and buried moneys; in regard to each of these the birds profess to be able to help men more than the gods. Crime offers many opportunities of gaining wealth; when a man becomes suddenly rich, as did Chremylus, it is assumed that he did not gain his wealth honestly.⁴ In time

¹ *Eq.*, 649 f.² *Eccl.*, 415 f.³ *Ibid.*, 590 f.⁴ *Plut.*, 30, 352 f.

of peace the farm produced almost all that its owner needed.
 "My farm," says Dicæopolis,

Never used to cry, "Come buy my charcoal,"
 Nor "Buy my oil," nor "Buy my anything,"
 But gave me what I wanted, freely and fairly,
 Clear of all cost, with never a word of buying.¹

This ideal independence of the individual farmer had no doubt been realized to a considerable extent before the Peloponnesian war in the case of larger estates; in this connection it is interesting because it sheds light on the conception of commerce as the opportunity of the wealthy to obtain foreign goods, and not as a normal fact in a country's internal life. War had disturbed this normal condition. When successful agriculture became impossible, Athens became dependent on her neighbors for the ordinary supplies of life; the luxuries of Bœotia were often shut out of her market, and at times the import of dried fish and grain was threatened.² Commerce was a source of wealth primarily in that successful exports and imports brought in large returns, if they met with no disaster.³ Retail trade was not recognized as a legitimate source of income, and the references to it explain the reason for this view, viz., success in trade was thought to be due to the trader's success in cheating. The tricks by which the bird seller makes his birds look fat and attractive are described;⁴ by cornering the market in the pots used to carry home small fish, Agoracritus proposes to keep the price of fish down,⁵ and a little later he is represented as controlling the market in the herbs used as relish with fish;⁶ the boldness of the common people in days of political suspicions is also part of the stock in trade of the petty dealer.⁷ Such being the conception of retail trade by both seller and buyer, it is not surprising that special police, *agoranomoi*, were appointed to look after the market-place, and that the state expected a good income from the market tax.⁸

¹ *Achar.*, 34 f.; FRERE'S translation.

² *Pax*, 551, 999 f.; *Eq.*, 805 f.; and the market scenes in the *Acharnians*.

³ *Av.*, 594 f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1079 f.

⁵ *Eq.*, 649.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 676.

⁷ *Vesp.*, 493, and the choice of a "sausage seller" in the *Knights* to outwit Cleon at his own game.

⁸ Cf. the market scenes in the *Achar.*

In one of the simpler of Aristophanes's plays, the *Plutus* ("Wealth"), he gives some data as to the nature of money which are important for the history of economics in Greece. The plot of the play is very simple. Chremylus, disappointed that wickedness, rather than righteous living, brings wealth, consults the oracle at Delphi to learn whether he shall bring up his son to wickedness in order that he may not remain poor. Apollo's answer enables him to find Plutus, who is a blind and rather crusty old fellow. He then proposes to have Plutus cured of his blindness at the shrine of Asclepius. The operation is successful, and thereafter wealth is to be distributed according to merit, while Plutus will naturally be worshipped instead of the gods who had caused his blindness. Only criminals and priests who had shared the sacrifices of the gods object to the change. The analysis of the nature of money appears at various points in the play, but particularly in the protests of Poverty and her plea that she has always benefited man more than Wealth could do. The value of money, we are told, depends on the limited supply of it, for if everyone had all he wanted there would be no incentive to labor, and the rich could purchase nothing with his money.¹ Nothing is said in this play of the function of the state in coining money, but the references to counterfeit money² show that the fact was recognized, even though nothing is said of the reasons for it. Again money, the means and measure of exchange, loses its value completely in a communistic state which directly supplies all the needs of its citizens so that they have no occasion to buy anything. Its intrinsic value is of little moment; it is valuable because it secures all objects to meet man's varied needs; it even enables him to gain political power and secures to the general victory in battle.³ Thus it gains such value that it serves as the motive for all the arts and sciences which supply what men wish to buy.⁴ At the same time it is a motive to crime;⁵ it is likely to be misused;⁶ and it weakens the character of its possessor.⁷

¹ *Plut.*, 510 f. *et passim*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 160, 510, 533.

² *E. g.*, in the *Achar.*, 517.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

³ *Plut.*, 145, 170, 184 f., 188 f.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 559 f.

The preceding discussion has proved somewhat scattering, because it was necessary to look at one point after another in Aristophanes's picture of life at Athens, and in each instance we have confined ourselves to the theoretical aspect of the question. Social and economic theory is never in the foreground; it must be found, if at all, in allusions, in the standpoint from which social life is treated, and in the manner in which data as to society are marshalled into dramatic scenes. The outcome of the present discussion may be summarized in two points.

First and most important, we have found some light on the state of political and social science in the latter part of the fifth century B. C. It has become clear that social questions were actively discussed in the days of Aristophanes, and that some slight progress was being made toward an analysis of social elements and forces. This discussion was reflected in the work of the poet himself; and, while he never sets himself to discuss social questions in a scientific way, they do often find a place in his work, and then they are treated with great insight and shrewdness. Perhaps it is fair to say that he is more interested in contributing something indirectly to the subjects which occupied the thought and attention of his hearers than in delineating character or in working out complicated plots. It was the political and social and economic conditions of Athens, more than any other one topic, which formed the background of his comedies.

The second point is a corollary of the first. It is universally recognized that the comedies of Aristophanes are the most important source for our knowledge of social life at Athens in the fifth century. Such testimony would be welcome if it came even from a superficial observer, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, from a theorist who presented social facts to prove his own hypotheses. It is doubly welcome from Aristophanes; for, while he is no theorist, he has an insight into the fundamental facts of social life that leads him to present a fair and broad-minded view even of the society he is satirizing.

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